

Reflections on Frustration

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Frustration tolerance refers to the ability to withstand difficult or vexing situations/events. Some may have High Frustration Tolerance (HFT) wherein they withstand annoying, even highly annoying, circumstances without getting disturbed (i.e., angry, anxious, depressed, or another emotional problem). In contrast, Frustration Intolerance (FI) or Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT) describes people for whom annoyances engender disturbed feelings, or exhibiting an insufficient amount of tolerance to achieve a desired goal, respectively.

These ideas can apply to a wide range of situations, ranging from the minutia to potentially traumatic events. Many people underestimate their ability to tolerate frustrating circumstances. We try to avoid frustrating circumstances and should they occur, lament about how we can't stand them or how said event should not be happening. Yet, many goals require tolerance of frustration, and putting off frustrating situations can wind up leading to the creation of a greater amount of frustration in the future.

Our genes, past experiences, and current level of stress, likely affect frustration tolerance. So, at any given time, we have proclivities to FI either alone or under certain conditions. Nevertheless, it is typically highly worth it to develop frustration tolerance so that we are less disturbed and more likely to accomplish what we want. This practice can seem at odds in a world that values instant gratification.

Speaking of pleasure, a caveat in this arena is a reminder to seize the day! I realize that these ideas may seem irreconcilable (i.e., on the one hand tolerate discomfort, on the other hand seek enjoyment), but it is likely worthwhile to engage in both practices. It might be argued that an optimal life requires thoughtful negotiation of the balance between cultivating frustration tolerance to accomplish meaningful goals (i.e., pain), and being present to enjoy the pleasures that life has to experience. If one has high frustration tolerance that fosters excessive work and acceptance of ascetic conditions, he/she may lose out on meaningful pleasures. But, the intolerance of discomfort can lead to abandonment of aspirations or a less meaningful life.

A helpful trick to increase FT in a specific area can be to identify difficult experiences that you have tolerated and explore how you endured them. What did you tell yourself about these tasks? It might be that you were able to tell yourself that the short-term frustration would pay off in the future, or that you would feel better after completing the task. You might say something like "I was able to stand this in the past, I'll be able to stand it again."

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